

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

October 28, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

We write to express our concern over the Honduran government's treatment of human rights activists known as the "Guapinol Water Defenders." These activists are fighting for the survival of their communities by protecting natural resources from open pit iron ore mining in the Carlos Escaleras National Park. Eight of the Guapinol Water Defenders have been held without bail in pre-trial detention for more than a year. Five more are at risk of detention after an appeals court reversed their acquittals and inexplicably reinstated charges. We are also deeply concerned that the U.S. has not yet denounced the killing on October 13th of community activist Arnold Joaquin Morazan Erazo, the latest in a horrific pattern of killings of environmental defenders in Honduras.¹ We call on the State Department to pressure the Government of Honduras government to protect human rights and environmental defenders, address the coordinated campaigns of social media threats and intimidation against them, and investigate and prosecute those responsible for their killings.

The Guapinol Water Defenders are leaders with the Municipal Committee in Defense of Common and Public Goods (CMDBCP) in Tocoa, Honduras. They are charged with aggravated arson and unjust detention related to complaints filed by the Pinares mining company, but there is strong reason to believe that these charges were brought in reprisal for their internationally recognized work² to protect the resources of the Carlos Escaleras National Park. A September 2020 report from the International Human Rights Law Clinic at the University of Virginia found that the Public Prosecutor's office has presented "zero evidence supporting the extreme measure

¹ Global Witness, "Defending Tomorrow: The Climate Crisis and Threats against Land and Environmental Defenders," July 2020. Available at <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/defending-tomorrow/>.

² European Parliament, "Sakharov Prize 2020: Meet the Finalists," October 10th, 2020. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/society/20201008STO88808/sakharov-prize-2020-meet-the-finalists>.

of prolonged deprivation of the community leader's freedom and integrity.”³ The eight detained individuals do not present a risk of fleeing—to the contrary, they voluntarily presented themselves to judicial authorities, and are willing to offer a bond to secure their freedoms. Furthermore, unwarranted detention exposes these water defenders to heightened risk of contracting COVID-19 in overcrowded Honduran prisons.

Honduras is one of the most dangerous and deadly countries for human rights and environmental defenders. According to a recent report by Global Witness, almost 150 environmental defenders have been killed in Honduras with near total impunity in the last decade, and in 2019 Honduras had the highest per capita number of killings of environmental defenders in the world.⁴ We are outraged and dismayed that the State Department has not condemned these acts or pressured the Honduran government to put an end to this pattern of murder, violence, harassment, intimidation, and criminalization.

On October 13th, Arnold Joaquin Morazan Erazo, a community leader who has faced criminal prosecution for his efforts to protect local watersheds and oppose mining in the Carlos Escaleras National Park, was murdered in his home in Guapinol. Days before he was killed, Honduran human rights monitors reported increased risks and intimidation from nearly 50 heavily armed military and police agents surveilling the community.⁵ Mr. Morazan's murder came a day after the EU Parliament selected the imprisoned Guapinol water protectors and Berta Caceres as finalists for the 2020 Sakharov Prize for Human Rights.

While the representative in Honduras of the UN High Commission for Human Rights, European diplomatic missions, and the government of Canada publicly denounced the murder, the U.S. has said nothing. Unfortunately, this is only the latest example of the Trump Administration's shameful refusal to forcefully condemn the extrajudicial murders of human rights defenders.

We urge the State Department to take the following actions:

1. Publicly condemn the murder of Mr. Morazan and other human rights defenders, raise their killings directly with the highest levels of the Honduran government, and call for those responsible to be held accountable;
2. Urge the Honduran government to guarantee protection and physical safety of Guapinol environmental defenders and their families;
3. Ensure US Embassy representatives attend and monitor upcoming judicial proceedings in cases against Guapinol water defenders;
4. Request the Honduran government provide valid justification for continuing to deprive Guapinol Water Defenders of their liberty in pre-trial detention without legal requirement or evidence;

³ UVA School of Law International Human Rights Clinic, “Pretrial Monitoring of the Guapinol and San Pedro Community,” September 2020.

⁴ Global Witness, “Defending Tomorrow: The Climate Crisis and Threats against Land and Environmental Defenders,” July 2020. Available at <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/defending-tomorrow/>.

⁵ Defensores en Línea, “Alerta: Asedio Policial Mantiene en alerta a la comunidad de Guapinol,” October 8, 2020, available at <https://www.defensoresenlinea.com/alerta-asedio-policial-mantiene-en-alerta-a-la-comunidad-de-guapinol/>.

5. Reassess the State Department's May 7, 2020 certification that the Central Government of Honduras is "protecting the rights of civil society, opposition political parties, and the independence of the media."⁶

The U.S. must work to end the pervasive impunity for the murder of Mr. Morazan and other environmental and water defenders in Honduras and ensure that the due process rights of the Guapinol water defenders facing detention and prosecution are protected.

We look forward to your response to these requests.

Sincerely,

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⁶ Federal Register, Vol. 85, No. 102, May 27, 2020, available at <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-05-27/pdf/2020-11382.pdf>.